

The following is the script from the Future of Union Academy Meeting that was held November 21, 2016. It was written and presented by Mike Harris, chairman of the Union Academy Board of Directors.

**The Future of Union Academy
by
Mike Harris, Chairman, Board of Directors
November 21, 2016**

Thank you for coming. In case you do not know me, I am Mike Harris, the Chair for Union Academy's Board of Directors. I am also a parent of four children, and we have been at UA for 4 years. On behalf of the board I am excited to share our plan for the Future of UA.

When my wife and I learned about UA, we were extremely interested; when we found out that our children "won" a spot in the lottery, we were dazed and confused. Once we began meeting the teachers, staff and administration, we were all in! There is no such thing as a perfect school, and UA will not be perfect for every student or every family, but for our family it is phenomenal.

I have moved a few times and my kids have attended several different schools that ranged from less than desirable to amazing. UA fits into the "amazing" category. For me the UA way is what it is all about. It's about the mission and Vision; it's about the 3 C's: Challenge, Character and Community.

From the youngest student to the graduating seniors, these kids are taught what it takes to be a good student, a good friend, and how to contribute in a positive way to society. UA teaches the whole person, not just to a test. Every person at UA is a whole person with many facets. Although we cannot specialize education for all of them, they are all taught to be individuals, to be concerned about their own education, their future decisions, the community they live and so much more. We teach our kids to care about themselves and others. We challenge them with top notch instruction. We allow our teachers to be innovative and teach using the methods and styles that work best for each teacher. We want our teachers to be equipped with what they need, so they have the greatest success with their students.

Each student is responsible for giving back to others and giving back to the community. I love the fact that not only is UA like a family with the community atmosphere, but UA requires all students, teachers, and staff to participate in community service. We expect families to give back to the school with 60 hours of service to our school.

All of these pieces fit together to make UA what it is and the UA way a reality.

The UA way is Challenge, Character, and Community.

I want to start with a little background information explaining why the school board began working with Dr. Walters to pursue a building project. Many school board members have been a part of UA for a long time and remember the early years. Others of us have heard the stories - the stories of community members who believed that every child should have access to excellent public instruction. People wanted to offer a choice to families who may not have their needs met in the traditional setting.

UA's Charter is about being innovative in practice, preparing students for graduation and preparing them for college if that is the path they choose.

I have been told stories of families signing loan notes to personally guarantee that buildings could be built. I have heard of families coming in two weeks before school started to paint, clean, and get classrooms ready for students.

UA has been built on the idea that we would be one unified school K through 12, with the dream of having a top notch school all on one campus.

A lot of hard work and dedication from many people have gotten us to where we are today. Yet we are not done!

We want to continue to offer the best K-12 education that we can. We want to offer character based education, challenging and appropriate academics, and a community that is like no other.

We have learned over the years that the younger the student and the fewer transitions in schools, the more they know and live by the UA way. Administration has shared with us that the toughest transition for any student is transitioning between schools. It is also harder to adjust the older the student is.

So we asked the question - how can we positively impact UA and our community? How can we maintain the UA way that started back in 2000? How can we enjoy the excitement and energy that has brought UA to where it is today? Where are we today? We are a National School of Character, one of the top 10 workplaces in Charlotte, 95% or greater college acceptance rate for our graduates and we boast graduation rates at 95% or higher.

The unified campus plays a large role in our long term success. The unified campus plays a large role in having the space we need to house the students we need to maintain the student enrollment to offer the programs that we offer.

It all comes down to numbers. We have been limited by space in our lower grades since we began. We have to add students in middle school and high school to have the size of school to be able to offer the programs that we offer to be competitive and to be UA. We must have at least 450 students in high school to have the athletic programs, the band, orchestra, theater, and other academic classes as well. We need to have around 100 graduates each year to maintain the courses and teachers that we have.

The School Board asked the question of administration, what do we have to do, what kind of space do we need and what would our enrollment have to be in order to funnel our kids from kindergarten all the way through high school? If we figure the normal rate of attrition, what would our elementary school look like, our middle school and high school?

If we could share our UA way with enough elementary students and if enough families started in UA from kindergarten, what would our enrollment have to be to graduate between 100 and 120 students?

The answer is 154 students per grade in K - 6 grades.

SO why? Research shows that the formational years are the early years. We have a much greater success in sharing and cultivating the culture of UA by living it in the early years. It

becomes part of everyday life. It is much more challenging to take a student who has been educated in a different environment and to get them to understand and become comfortable with our unique environment.

Looking at research from American Psychological association.

Research in Brain Function and Learning

The importance of matching instruction to a child's maturity level

Margaret Semrud-Clikeman, PhD, LP, ABPdN, University of Minnesota Medical School

We learn that the brains of students in early elementary are still growing and maturing. Students learning is mostly rote in nature, that is that they are forming habits, they are taking what is being taught, socially and academically and making it habits. So while their brain is developing, they are learning the habits that will make them successful all the way through life.

From late elementary school into middle school, **inferential thinking** becomes more emphasized, while rote learning is de-emphasized. This shift in focus is supported by the increased connectivity in the brain and by chemical changes in the **neuronal pathways** that support both short and long term memory. These chemical changes can continue for hours, days and even weeks after the initial learning takes place (Gazzaniga, & Magnun, 2014). Learning becomes more consolidated, as it is stored in long-term memory.

This means that as we raise our children and the more we teach them to use what they have been given the better they will learn how to apply it for themselves. We teach them to use what they have... If they have not been a part of UA they may be missing part of the teaching and equation that we depend on at UA for our success in the 3 C's.

The article goes on to say

The environment can improve a child's ability.

The environment can increase ability or it can lower it. A child with average ability in an enriched environment may well accomplish more than a bright child in an impoverished environment. Although it is heartening to believe that enrichment can be effective at any point, recent research indicates that early enrichment is more beneficial than later enrichment. The brain grows in spurts, particularly in the 24th to 26th week of gestation, and between the ages of one and two, two and four, middle childhood (roughly ages 8 to 9) and adolescence (Semrud-Clikeman & Ellison, 2009).

So if we are given the chance to teach more children in the earlier grades, we will have enough students enrolled to funnel through middle school and into high school. We will still have our lottery and we will still enroll in all grades. The goal is to enroll more at the earlier grades for consistency of the 3 C's and culture of UA, but we will enroll students in every grade that is needed each year.

Beginning next year we will be expanding to 7 classes per grade level in K-5 as space permits. We are also adding teachers to cover the new classes. We will keep our ratios of teachers/assistants to students the same. We will have full-time assistants in every class in the early elementary years (K-2) like we currently have and half-time assistants in the older classes (grades 3-4) as we currently have.

Ratios will stay the same... We are dedicated to keeping the class sizes manageable for the best outcome for the teachers and students.

So to review the building plan it will be in 3 phases --- MPR and Classrooms, Fieldhouse and Fine Arts, and the elementary school building.

By doing these expansions, we will be able to move 3rd and 4th grade up next school year. They will be in dedicated space away from the older kids. Elementary school will still be treated and separate like elementary is now.

The following school year, 2018 -2019, we will have all of elementary school located on the Upper Campus.

Carpool is a concern for all of us, and we will continue to work with the DOT, our contractor, administration, and other professionals to ensure a smooth transition. It is a work in progress that is of the highest importance for safety and ease of access. We are pursuing bus transportation to our highest population of students. This will be initially in 2 locations to allow remote drop-off and pick-up to assist families and ease carpool.

The bottom line is - this is an aggressive plan. It is doable. We need you and your support, blood, sweat and tears, as well as your financial support. Talk to anyone you know who owns a business and may want to donate or offer grants. We need all the help we can get. Also, when it is time to move in, expect to come assemble furniture, paint walls, and help get the school ready for students. This is the UA way and the tradition of the UA family working together to make UA what it is.